

**The Ed Media Center: A Second Life Professional Development Model  
for Relational Aesthetics**

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**Book Chapter**

*Explorations in Virtual Worlds: New Literacy and Learning Platforms*

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## **Abstract**

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**Key Words:** Relational Aesthetics, Art Education, Second Life, Virtual Worlds, Ed Media Center, Cerulean Gallery, Professional Development, Social Practice Art

The Ed Media Center in Second Life provides multiple professional development opportunities for art educators to explore the educational potential of virtual worlds together. Since its launch in 2009, it has hosted numerous events that address contemporary students' learning preferences and that enable artists and art educators to become effective Internet content creators in an age of rampant content consumption.

Because of its intrinsic qualities as a performative research piece that was created by social practice artists specifically to conduct, observe and record human interactions, Relational Aesthetics is an appropriate critical framework. Within its full schedule of events, the Ed Media Center is theoretically grounded implicitly in Relational Aesthetics and continues to prove to be an effective professional model of it. Of all the professional development events held in the Ed Media Center, the sequence of exhibitions held in its Cerulean Gallery most clearly illustrates how Relational Aesthetics operates within that venue to promote a collaborative *Pedagogy of Wonder*.

## **The Ed Media Center: A Second Life Professional Development Model for Relational Aesthetics**

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The Ed Media Center in Second Life provides multiple professional development opportunities for art educators to explore the educational potential of virtual worlds with one another. Since its launch in 2009, it has hosted numerous events that address contemporary students' learning preferences and that enable artists and art educators to become effective Internet content creators in an age of rampant content consumption.

Some might think of the physical body as a container, a box, or a fence, or a wall. Second Life acts as a catapult out, launching the self into new realms of being and of being together. Since it is necessary to first create an avatar in order to navigate within Second Life, many of which are very imaginative expressions from the human and animal kingdom, participants in the many Ed Media Center's professional development events creatively reinvent how they present themselves to others through their avatars. Because of the Ed Media Center's intrinsic qualities as a performative research piece created by a social practice artist specifically to conduct, observe and record human relations, Relational Aesthetics is an appropriate critical framework. Within its full schedule of events, the Ed Media Center is theoretically grounded implicitly in Relational Aesthetics and continues to prove to be an effective professional model of it.

Bourriaud (1998) explains that relational art involves social opportunities and conviviality, rather than an insular private perspective for artists. "Their works involve methods of social exchanges, interactivity with the viewer within the aesthetic experience being offered to him/her and the various communication processes, in their tangible dimension as tools serving to link individuals and human groups together." (Bourriaud, 2002 p. 43)

Second Life, a multi-user 3D Web application is a perfect venue for Relational Aesthetics Professional Development events. It may be downloaded for free from the Internet to create fantastic educational and social environments. Located on a beautiful tropical beach, complete with palm trees, dolphins, and the ambient sounds of paradise, the Ed Media Center includes multiple virtual facilities for educational conversations, collaborations, and exhibitions. Its spacious and open Cerulean Gallery, with its many provocative amenities, such as a swimming pool, Buddha waterfall, and cappuccino bar, the elegant upstairs classroom and lending library, the rooftop building platform and the seaside seminar pavilion, readily transports visitors into an ideal world where they can joyously create and interact without the constraints of real world physical space.

Some may argue that there is little need for Second Life when many persons are challenged enough in the first. On this note, we may recall what renown cultural critic Neil Postman (1999) counsels us to ask, *What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?* “We have responsibilities for ourselves and our institutions that supersede our responsibilities to the potential of technology.” (Postman, 1999 p. 42) Lately, Sherry Turkel (2011) joins in to caution about the power of ubiquitous technologies over our lives. “I believe we have reached a point of inflection, where we can see the costs and start to take action. We have agreed to an experiment in which we are the human subjects. We deserve better. When we remind ourselves that it is we who decide how to keep technology busy, we shall have better.” (Turkel, 2011, p. 296) Certainly, like all technologies, Second Life can be abused, but for those who may inquire about its educational potential, recent research shows that in many exciting ways, it can provide a very positive venue for instilling what Najafi (2005) calls a *Pedagogy of Wonder*.

Notable participant observer action research in Second Life includes Li-Fen Lilly Lu’s (2008) early work in the Art Café’, a classic testimony to the efficacy of thoughtfully designed virtual learning environments where students may be engaged in successful interactions with others while having meaningful encounters with art. (Lu, 2008) Mary Stokrocki (2010) reports how her curriculum field trials for Second Life Personal Learning Environments facilitated a *new life* for her young participants. (Stokrocki, 2010)

Anthropologist Thom Boellstorff (2008) presents a fascinating account of his field research also conducted solely within Second Life, and describes its multiple avenues for magical *cybersociality* and creative *lifeworld* making. (Boellstorff, 2008) Hsiao-Cheng Han's study about how students react to and learn from fantastic Second Life imagery similarly testifies to the rigor and wonder of *inworld* participant observer research. (Han, 2010)

One might look at Julian Glynn Crooks' current research to access important data on how the numerous events that have been scheduled in the Ed Media Center in Second Life effectively embrace current learning styles and provide a professional development forum for promoting wonder and possibility. Employing a participant observer research methodology, she scheduled diverse events that functioned as aesthetic inquiry case studies for investigating the effectiveness of the Center as an alternative venue for art professionals to come together, to show work, and to test and discuss the particular challenges of teaching millennial learners.

Digital technologies have significantly influenced the behaviors and attitudes of how today's learners acquire knowledge. "There is a fundamental shift in the preferred modes of learning that are typically characterized by changes in the quality of attention, an inclination for visual materials, a strong desire to collaborate, and a hands-on approach to learning that are hallmarks of this group's learning style. Some research indicates that these changes may have a certain physiological basis, and there is little doubt that new forms of social interaction are also at play." (Crooks, 2011, p.2) From an extensive review of contemporary literature on the topic, Crooks has identified six distinct student learning characteristics: Social Connectivity, Identity Play, Participatory Creativity, Attention Issues, Visual Preference, and Inductive Approach. As part of her digital qualitative research design, those six areas were embedded as observation benchmarks in numerous educational events and exhibitions that were held at the Ed Media Center. These included conducting graduate art education classes in the upstairs space, hosting professional art education meetings as well as a visiting professor's students and their performance pieces, mounting numerous local and international art exhibits by

professional artists, university and secondary art students, art schools, and a British museum. (Crooks, 2011)

Of all the professional development events held in the Ed Media Center, the sequence of exhibitions held in its Cerulean Gallery most clearly illustrates how Relational Aesthetics operates in that venue. To better appreciate the evolution of exhibition development in the Cerulean Gallery, imagine a layering of art exhibition experiences from the bottom up, with each successive layer above gaining technological power, and partially revealing characteristics of the one below. A stratified palimpsest of Relational Aesthetics organically evolves from this process of accretion of visual worlds and social interaction. Although every successive experiential pass does, in fact, overlay the level beneath, each layer shows through in some way and contributes synergistically and unmistakably to the whole. This powerful combination of people, art, and the Internet forms its own unique ecosystem, an interesting dynamic that was reported in the early Web project, *A World Community of Old Trees: Ecology Art Education Online*. (Julian, 1997)

At the time of this writing eight major exhibits with their attendant opening receptions, visitor networking and feedback opportunities were held at the Center: *Wish You Were Here*, a collaboration with Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Center in the Western Isles, UK, *Places of the Heart*, an international theme show, *The Anime Show*, works by a high school art club in Philadelphia, *From First Life to Second*, drawings by students of the Art Students League of New York, two independent shows by professional artists, *The Photographs of Lady Clementina Hawarden* on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum, and an exhibit of student work from the National Chiayi University in Taiwan. Philosophically grounded in Relational Aesthetics, each successive show evolved in form, gallery technique, communication mode and social interactivity from the one before.

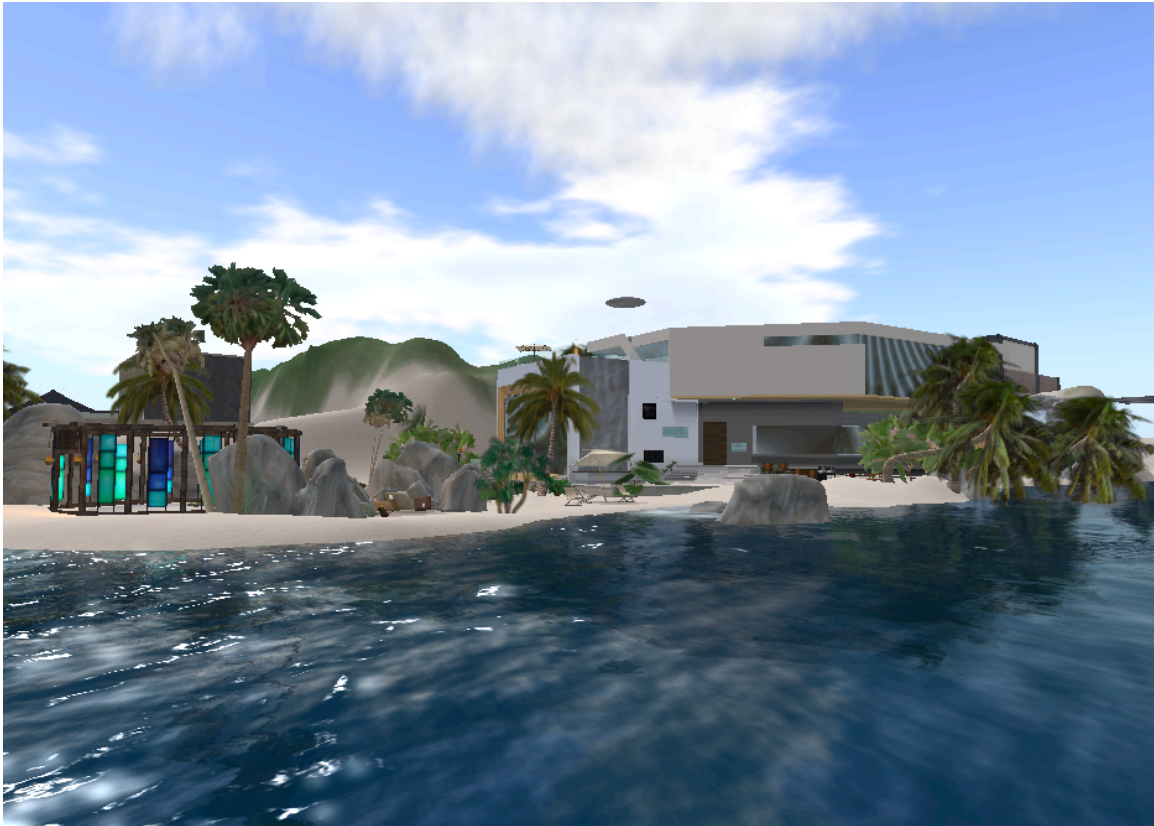


Figure 1. The Ed Media Center in Second Life

In contrast to 2-D Web galleries such as Flickr, and other popular photo sharing sites, the Cerulean Gallery on the 3D Web creates a sense of physical presence as well as offering opportunities to display art, to share aesthetic experience, to collaborate with others, and to connect over geographic distance. Additionally, the art works are scaled to their actual size, both in proportion to other pieces and to the figures of the avatar visitors. The textures of the pieces are photorealistic, allowing the viewers to see the work as it appears in real life when they zoom in. Each piece is labeled with information about the artist and the work. Viewers' avatars can virtually move through the gallery, stop and look at labeled pieces, view previous opening receptions on a large flat screen TV, participate in a group critiques by viewing images on a Power Point screen, sit upon gallery furniture and discuss the works. In this virtual space, they can share the work with others who, though geographically distant, appear to occupy the same virtual room, looking at the same art, at the same time. (Crooks, 2011)

*Wish You Were Here* was the first exhibit to be held in the Cerulean Gallery. It grew out of one of the gallery co-director's physical visit to the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Center in North Uist, Western Isles, UK. Initially, actual art works were done by Scottish students and by graduate Art + Design Education students at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. The project's next iterative layer was an Internet exhibit of the digitized images on Blogger, which also included copious text comments generated over time from both student groups. In an interesting twist, actual digital prints from that Internet show were exhibited in the University president's gallery on campus and the Scottish students attended the opening via Skype. For the third stage, the *Wish You Were Here* exhibit was hung in the Ed Media Center's Cerulean Gallery in Second Life for several months duration, where it was visited by numerous student groups, as well as by art and design education faculty from various universities. Audience responses documented by the Ed Media Center online chat archives did testify to the power of the original actual artwork to communicate participants' diverse and sensitive senses of place through the 3-D Web interface of Second Life.



Figure 2. *Wish You Were Here* Show in The Cerulean Gallery in the Ed Media Center



As the first show in the Cerulean Gallery, there were indeed technical skills to learn and hurdles to overcome. For example, each piece needed to be properly scaled. In the case of the University president's show in real space, the physical constraints of the actual exhibition gallery dictated that the original size of each piece be modified in the digital print that was hung on the wall. Some of the pieces were very large, some quite small, but the reproductions for that show were all the same size. In the virtual world these limitations were absent. It was possible to assure that each piece could be the same size, relative to an avatar, as its original would be to a person. It seemed important to maintain this integrity for a true experience of co-presence. Interactive signs were created that, when touched, would deliver a press release about the show and a list of works. (Crooks, 2011)



Figure 3. InAEA Conversations in the Ed Media Center Beach Pavilion

The next exhibit, *Places of the Heart*, overwrote both the physical and Blog iterations of that initial event, as it was designed exclusively for the virtual space of the Cerulean Gallery. A call for participation was posted on the International Art Education Association (InAEA) website and instructions were given on how to email the images and how to meet the qualifications of the exhibit's theme. As a point of departure for their creative process, artists were directed to view Gerhard Richter's altered postcard

paintings of place. International participation included both students and faculty from various universities.

Similar to the purely virtual exhibition design intention of *Places of the Heart*, the following exhibit in the Cerulean Gallery was *The Anime Club* by students at Kensington Culinary Art High School in Philadelphia. Their art teacher, another MA candidate in the Art + Design Education Department at the University of the Arts, scanned the actual student work for the show from their first layer of studio involvement in the project, into their second level of exhibition experience in Second Life.

The digitized pieces were then individually altered to adapt to the Cerulean Gallery. To maximize their graphic impact, they were then enlarged and the lines were darkened in Photoshop to make them more visible in the virtual world. According to their art teacher, the experience had a very positive effect on the participants' self esteem. The students reported back on questionnaires that seeing their work in the virtual gallery made them feel like real artists. The research findings from each student exhibition event supported one or more of the learning preference benchmarks of Net Generation students: Social Connectivity, Identity Play, Participatory Creativity, Attention Level, Visual Preference or Inductive Approach. (Crooks, 2011)

*The Photographs of Lady Clementina Hawarden* was on loan to the Cerulean Gallery from the Victoria and Albert Museum. Adding another layer of exhibition design to the initial one in the actual museum galleries in London, the idea for the virtual exhibit came from a face to face meeting at the *Museums and the Web* international conference in Philadelphia. The images were emailed and manipulated to fit the gallery walls, maintaining the apparent proportions of the original 19<sup>th</sup> century prints. The virtual show provided opportunities to view the work, to download information about the artist, and link to the museum's website which gave information about the show that was mounted there in real space.

Following the Victoria and Albert exhibit, the Cerulean Gallery hosted two solo shows

featuring Philadelphia artists Hana Williams and Jeanine LeClaire. The works of both of these artists were modified from the original size to emphasize a monumentality of scale that could be truly appreciated through the mediation of the avatar body. To increase social interactivity with the works, each of the solo shows was advertised both through the gallery website and the *inworld* search engine. Statistical tracking of Avatar visitors' passing through the gallery door revealed a brisk traffic, with viewers coming from all over the Second Life world. Both artists invited their friends to the show, and groups would make the trip into Second Life. Many of these were creating avatars for the first time, and with the expressed purpose of experiencing the work in its virtual setting. The exhibition design of these shows added new layers of scale and interactivity to the professional experience of the artists and their audiences.

Eager to investigate the characteristics of the classic atelier instructional model of art education in a Relational Aesthetics professional development model in Second Life, one of the authors invited her students at The Art Students League of New York to show their work in the Cerulean Gallery. Their *First Life to Second* exhibition showcased pieces from her *Drawing from Nature* workshop, an ongoing peripatetic Relational Art experience scheduled in diverse geographies. Specifically incorporating the teaching techniques of legendary League instructor, Kimon Nicolaïdes (1941), this workshop engaged adult artists to both create work in a traditional studio environment according to his methods, and then to exhibit their pieces in the non-traditional virtual gallery space. This rich mix of traditional and contemporary aesthetic philosophies and instructional practices respectfully nods to the past and celebrates the present in the performative Second Life environment.

*Taiwan Now* provided a wonderful opportunity for cross-cultural shared aesthetic experience in the Cerulean Gallery. Student artists from the National Chiayi University in Taiwan created work reflecting their homeland, and the entire class attended the opening social event. The gallery was filled with creative avatars: robots and pretty girls, a giant penguin and a troubadour – even a student whose avatar was a sports car. The students chatted and played, exploring the space through the medium of their avatar bodies.

Several were drinking cappuccino and talking about the work, while others went to the beach outside. The car avatar played the piano, while the troubadour joined in on his guitar. This event provided yet another more enriched layer of joint presence in The Ed Media Center's Cerulean Gallery, where participants engaged in heightened creative social interaction and modeled Relational Aesthetics in action.



Figure 4. *Taiwan Now* Exhibition Opening in the Ed Media Center's Cerulean Gallery

All eight of the exhibits to date, are electronically archived in both machinima and digital image formats in the Educational Media Center Library in Second Life, and on the Cerulean Gallery website. (Cerulean Gallery, 2012)

In this discussion of how the Ed Media Center and the Cerulean Gallery function as a continuing professional development resource for Relational Aesthetics in Second Life, the palimpsest visualization of the layered exhibition events may prove helpful. As each event layer overwrites the one beneath, it is informed and honored by it. Although some artifacts of the human social theatre may be temporarily obscured, nothing is really ever

thrown out, and historicity matters. If Second Life is a catapult out of self, then Relational Aesthetics provides the philosophical context for self to connect with others through an art experience. The Ed Media Center demonstrates that this process can expand and enchant the art education community its educational practices.

While the Ed Media Center's events provide insights into designing virtual exhibitions in Second Life, and facilitating interactive aesthetic inquiry within the framework of Bourriaud's (2002) social theories of relational art, the adventures of the Cerulean Gallery directors, Jules McWinnie aka Julian Crooks, and Junie Mirabella aka June Julian, have just begun. You are cordially invited to add your own layer of Relational art education practice to the Ed Media Center by scheduling a class meeting, professional seminar, performance event or exhibit. Please scan the code below for the Cerulean Gallery website, where you will find proposal guidelines, a Second Life tutorial, and related resources.

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